



**Mindset**

**Theory**

**“What we can or cannot do, what we consider possible or impossible, is rarely a function of our true capability. It is more likely a function of our beliefs about who we are.”**

**Albert Camus**



We've all heard it before. "I am just not a creative person." "I don't have an organised bone in my body." "I wish I was as smart as her." As humans, we love classifying things and people. We give ourselves, or others, a label - and it sticks. These sorts of mental shortcuts sit easily in the mind. They help make the world that much more explicable.

But what happens when we face a challenge that requires more creativity or organisation or intelligence from us than we have always told ourselves we have? Do we find a way to make it happen or do we collapse? Do we say it's impossible or broaden our definition of possible?

The answer to this, depends on whether we have a growth or fixed mindset.

## What are Growth and

## Fixed Mindsets?

The concept of growth and fixed mindsets was developed by Carol Dweck in her 2006 book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Dweck is a psychologist and current professor of psychology at Stanford University. Her research on motivation and self-regulation has become a major paradigm for thinking about how people learn and achieve.

In *Mindset*, Dweck explored two ways of thinking which people can practice and how they impact on learning outcomes. A person with a **growth mindset** believes that their character, capabilities and traits are open to change through growth and learning (i.e., they are malleable in a positive direction).

Those with a **fixed mindset** believe that these characteristics are relatively fixed and unable to meaningfully evolve. In her research, she found that people who hold growth mindsets were much more likely to meet the challenges they encounter with energy and resilience, and ultimately surpass them. Those with fixed mindsets would often stall in the face of obstacles.

We can immediately understand the relevance of this for students. Often young people express fixed mindsets about themselves and others, and this leads to negative motivation and performance at school. However, what we are seeing is that this way of thinking is applicable in any domain of human life where motivation to learn or progress is important.

## Unpacking Mindset

## Theory

Since its publication, Dweck's theory has been the focus of a significant amount of research. On the whole, cognitive research around fixed and growth mindsets has been highly promising, although there have been some mixed results. Studies show that growth mindsets held by students positively impact on motivation and performance over time, including a large scale OECD study of students from 74 countries.

We are also seeing that people who hold a growth mindset are more likely to persist in the face of difficulty and challenges. Interestingly, there is a small body of evidence linking growth mindsets which neurological changes such as greater connectivity to the parts of the brain used for learning and control.

While some research failed to reproduce these effects, a response prepared by Carol Dweck and David Yeager concluded that these studies were likely culturally dependent and fail to take into account how impact might vary depending on the learner's circumstances (such as stronger results demonstrated by those facing academic difficulties or setbacks).

For leaders and learning designers it's important to note that the impact of these mindsets is not just about the mindsets of learners – but the teachers as well. For example, in a longitudinal study of 15,000 students and their professors in STEM at two universities in the United States, those classes taught by professors who believed ability to be fixed were found to have a racial achievement gap twice as large as those classes with professors who had growth mindsets.



## How do we apply it for

### Leaders

At its most basic level, our first step is about introducing the **concept** and giving a name to a practice that we might be engaging in every day. By coming to see the ways we are applying fixed mindsets to how we think – and talk – about ourselves and others, we can start the process of changing our behaviours.

Our key tool for this is **reframing**. Reframing is about taking a fixed mindset statement which we tell ourselves or others and reconstructing it as a growth mindset statement. For example, rather than “I am not smart enough for this”, we might say: “I can learn how to do this.”

In Dweck’s own courses she recommends reflecting on the **triggers** which make us revert to a fixed mindset. We all have specific domains of our life or characteristics which can cause us to retreat into this way of thinking. Taking the time to look into ourselves will mean we are better equipped for the moments when they come.

Another powerful approach encouraged by Dweck is **counselling or mentoring others** about their mindsets. We want to help our friends, colleagues and loved ones reach their potential and are often more likely to apply growth mindset thoughts to them than ourselves. Speak to them about their self-limiting beliefs and give them another perspective on what is possible.

## Challenges/Opportunities

It can be easy to fall into an oversimplified notion of mindset theory though. Dweck says that a **“false growth mindset”** can occur when people either don’t completely understand the concept of growth mindset or don’t realise when they are being triggered into fixed mindsets. She notes that everyone is likely to have a fixed mindset at some point about certain things. However, she believes that we can strive to reduce the area of our lives where that happens.

Dweck gives the example of focusing solely on effort as something which should be rewarded. While effort is important, we need to praise effort which shows “learning progress or success”. Effort needs to be coupled with strategy. Dweck refers to this as “process praise.”

## Key Takeaways

Growth and fixed mindsets are not only a powerful tool for thinking about how we learn and achieve, but they are also quickly becoming paradigmatic in the education sector. Leveraging this model for your organisation can be transformative and unlock the potential of those around you.





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